DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 346 465 CS 213 376

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TITLE Where Is Genre in Writing Instruction?
PUB DATE Mar 92
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (43rd, Cincinnati, OH, March 19-21, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audience Awareness; Case Studies; *Discourse Modes; *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; *Literary Genres; Student Writing Models; Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS Composition Theory; Discourse Aims; Discourse Communities; Stanford University CA; *Writing Contexts

ABSTRACT

In writing, as in conversation, there are implicit boundaries which separate various modes of communication, and these boundaries cause exclusion, discomfort, and misunderstanding. The existence of these boundaries results in a number of issues, such as the categorization of texts, the differences between writing for English classes and writing in other academic disciplines, and the boundaries between audiences. A fourth issue bringing all of these issues together is that of genre. Research in several freshman composition classes illustrated the ways that conceptualizations of genre are played out in the writing and discussions of teachers and students. For example, there is an interplay between notions of discourse mode and genre. Teacher response to one student essay was driven by the theoretical model of the five traditional discourse modes--description, narration, exposition, persuasion, and poetry--a model which does not allow for a full discussion of the complexities of a text such as that written by the student. The revised essay, in conjunction with the teacher's advice, conformed more to the generic conventions of a moral, didactic essay. This essay also illustrates the second issue of boundaries; that is, the differences between writing done inside and outside of English classrooms. The student's initial attempt did not fit the traditional boundaries of freshman composition, and the teacher was caught by the boundaries of the discipline. In another instance, a teacher assigned a reflective essay which compared short stories, and illustrated the assignment by making a distinction between the genre of the reflective essay (the comparison paper) and the genre of the business report designed to make a recommendation. Finally, at Stanford University (California) a project in which students take on writing assignments for non-profit agencies demonstrates students' difficulty crossing over into genres outside academia. The point is made that issues of audience are embedded within all genres, and negotiating a way across the boundaries of genres is central in acts of writing. (HB)

4C's Conference
March, 1992

WHERE IS GENRE IN WRITING INSTRUCTION?

by Anne Beaufort, Stanford University

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In his wonderful book, Lives on the Boundaries, Mike Rose explores the boundaries between the ghettos of Los Angeles and the campus of UCLA...between the world of fighting in Vietnam and sitting in a continuation school classroom...between street talk and classroom talk. These are boundaries that cause exclusion, discomfort, and misunderstanding.

To borrow Rose's metaphor, I would like to think of my explorations today as dealing with boundaries: boundaries between texts...between contexts...and between audiences. These boundaries also cause exclusion, discomfort and misunderstanding.

My interest in boundaries, and in composition theory, comes from my own experience moving between the boundaries of the college classroom and business...between studying literature and teaching composition...between writing press releases and academic research reports. I will explore with you today three issues of boundaries in writing instruction, and a fourth issue central to all three: the matter of genre.

First, there is a problem with the categorization of texts according to the five discourse modes established by Alexander Bain in the 19th century. We all know them: description, narration, exposition, persuasion, and poetry. As Harned (1985), D'Angelo (1984) and others have pointed out, these modes are artificial. Rather than being discreet categories for texts, they are used in

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any number of combinations in the texts we both write and read.

Second, boundaries exist between writing for English classes and writing in other academic disciplines. In English we have developed fake genres for purposes of instruction that do not correspond with the way historians, scientists, philosophers, and economists write. What is "the research paper?" Where, outside of an English classroom, does the five paragraph essay exist?

And a third problem is one of boundaries between audiences. Writing for teachers and writing for a group of refugees or the readers of USA Today or the editorial board of an academic publication present different challenges. And yet we offer our students few opportunities to cross these boundaries during the process of receiving their education.

In the few minutes I have here, I would like to show you some of the ways in which I have found these boundaries between texts, contexts, and audience playing themselves out in the talk of teachers and students in the English classroom, and the ways in which notions of genre lie at the heart of the issues.

These days literary theory gives us some rich extensions to the traditional definition of the term "genre." The term is used by reader-response critics to signify a set of expectations between readers and writers. Rhetoricians add another component to the connotation. Carolyn Miller (1984) says, "A rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish." (p. 151) James Slevin's definition (1988) perhaps captures the full

connotation of the term as it is generally used today. He says genre is

> ...an inherited social form, a discursive institution, within which a writer fuses meaning, structure, linguistic features, and pragmatic purposes and effects. (p.5)

So what does the notion of "genre" have to do with boundaries you may ask. Or you may say, "Isn't it just another set of rigid barriers between texts, similar to the discourse modes?

Alastair Fowler (1982), tells us, "Genres appear to be much more like families than classes," relieving us of the notion of rigid boundaries and classifications. Like families, he is arguing, genres are loosely-defined groupings or classes of texts. Within families, there are close and distant ties. There are black sheep. There are disinherited members. But above all, there are clear, historically, culturally rooted relations with our relatives. And likewise with genres.

I would like to turn now to some examples from my research in several freshman composition classes to illustrate the ways in which conceptualizations of genres are played out in both the writing and discussion of teachers and students. The first example will show the interplay between notions of discourse mode and genre--and the interplay across boundaries of texts.

One of the options for a first essay in this particular freshman composition class was, "Explore how the sharing of a hobby or sport and parental love are linked within families. Discuss how they make one's relationship more complex, difficult or painful." Notice the possibilities within this one assignment for

description, narration, exposition, and persuasion. Let's see what Rod, one student who wrote on this topic did, and his teacher's responses.

Rod chooses to write on the painful relationship he has with his father and the way in which the relationship is encapsulated in Rod's participation in wrestling. The closing paragraph of Rod's first draft reads,

> As I stumbled exhausted from the main floor...amidst a tumult of congratulations, I saw my father waiting on the sidelines of the gym...Upon meeting my gaze, he burst into laughter that seemed to say, "We did it!"...But looking in his face, I saw his eyes brimming with tears. Seeing my father's expression, I could tell that as he had watched from the stands...he had been out there on the mat, shooting every takedown with me every step of the way. This realization touched me so deeply that I wanted to open my heart to this stubborn, unreasonable, self-centered man. I let myself realize the truth of his feelings that I had known all along, and I understood his selfish demands. Of course he wanted me to do better for his own sake: he lived for me. The most driving force in his life was to watch his only son wrestle. For a while, as we walked from the crowded gym, with his arm around me, I loved my dad.

Rod read his paper in class, and students responded with praise. The teacher, a dedicated, engaging teacher and writer herself, responded as follows after one student's comment that perhaps there was too much detail in one section of Rod's essay. She said, and I quote:

> ...when you get into writing a story it's harder to bring out the issues and it's hard to know when to stop, how much you have to tell...I think that what happens is that in this essay you get so involved, there's too much narration...We're sort of captured by the story telling so we're not thinking as much what is the real issue here...which is the same issue in the John Cheever story...how do fathers and sons relate to one another through sports...Something that would make the essay interesting, could you make any generalizations about father and son relationships or any generalizations about what you learned through the experience, so that we're focusing. We have the narration and then we have the issues and then we

have the reflection..."

This teacher's comments seem driven by the theoretical model of the five discourse modes, a model which does not allow for a full discussion of the complexities of a text such as Rod's, and which places the highest value, as Anne DiPardo (1990) has pointed out, on exposition. Also, the teacher is thinking in terms of the essay form as it has been institutionalized in English classes.

In reality, Rod's essay fits the definition of the genre offered by Samuel Johnson, "a loose sally of the mind, an irregular, undigested piece." I could see it appearing in the New York Times Sunday Magazine or, with more sophistication, in The New Yorker. But the institution of English classes pushes towards the "school essay" and away from literary or journalistic conceptions of the essay, with their greater emphasis on description and narration. Responding very consistent with traditional values in composition pedagogy, our teacher continues her comment to the class:

> The reason that some people are critical of having students write this kind of essay is they're fearful that students will just write a story [a valid concern]. And it isn't enough to just write a story, but it is important to learn to write a story to capture someone's attention and then to think about what that story reflects and that's hard, it's really hard to do that when it's something that's near to you..

At this point in the discussion, another student says,

> I thought Rod's [essay] was really powerful and I would sort of think it would take away from some of the power if he tried to generalize about fathers and sons.

The teacher responds,

> I'm not saying that he should only generalize about fathers and sons...like John Cheever in "The National Pastime" does

> not generalize at all, but that's a short story. Okay. In an essay, I think we can reflect at the end on what it means. There are different types of essays. And some of them don't reflect and I don't want you to kill it with reflection...but sometimes it helps the reader to see some kind of generalizations of some kinds of truths emerging.

So what happens? Rod's second draft of the essay is largely unchanged, but it has the following ending:

> Reflecting on my experience with my father, I have learned several lessons and gained many values. I realize the impact of my father's actions, and I hope to be better in many ways when I become a father. I can see the constricting pressure that I endured, and I wish to avoid putting this pressure on my children. Being kinder and more open than my father, I am certain that I will be closer to my children when they are growing up. Although wrestling has seemed to be the only way for my father to relate to me, I hope to be able to build an unrestricted relationship with my children, regardless of their interests, abilities and success.

Rod has now conformed to the generic conventions for a certain type of essay--one which includes a moral, didactic purpose. It is still within the broad family of the genre we label "the essay", but it is a particular variety of that genre, one which is associated primarily with the composition classroom.

Discussions of the loose boundaries of genres, the varieties of subgenres within one genre, and the social purposes and contexts for writing within a particular genre could address the fact that journalistic and literary renditions of the essay don't call for moralizing. And the limiting, narrow categorization of texts by discourse mode can be replaced with a more powerful framework--that of genre--for looking at the complexities of texts.

The second problem--that of false boundaries between the writing done inside and outside of English classrooms--we can see

is also at issue in Rod's experience writing his essay on his relationship to his father. In the context of the traditional English composition class, his essay is perhaps out of place. Rod had analyzed and generalized from his experience--mental processes which are highly valued in the freshman composition class--but he chose to convey his message almost entirely through description and narration. The generic form in which he cast his observations does not fit the traditional boundaries of freshman composition. And in his teacher's comments, we sense the institutional ambivalence of upholding the traditions of freshman compostion and at the same time enabling literate writing. She is caught by the boundaries of our discipline.

Let me give another example of the ways in which boundaries between disciplines, between contexts, play themselves out in our teaching. Another teacher, whom I will call Mary, is introducing the first essay assignment in the second quarter of her students' freshman composition course. The assignment is to write a comparative essay about two or three of the short stories they have read and discussed. Students are told, in their paper, to "think about a theme common to the stories, and discuss similarities and/or differences in the writer's handling of it."

Mary begins her explanation to students of how to write a comparison paper with an analogy from outside the academic context. She says:

> ...lots of times comparative papers are written as a way of explaining why one thing is better than another thing. If you try to imagine outside the context of a university say a workplace and somebody says to you shall we get IBM or shall

> we get Macintosh? You would write a kind of report...in which you would compare the IBM with the Macintoshes and the point of the report would be to say, "Therefore we should get Macintoshes. They're cheaper, there's more software available, blah, blah, blah..." That's the case outside academia when you write a comparative paper.

She goes on to say,

> ...inside academia it doesn't always work as well...in many academic settings when a teacher asks you to bring two things together, if a sociology instructor asks you to compare two theories or if an art historian asks you to compare two paintings or if an English teacher asks you to compare short stories, often the instructors hope in asking you to do a comparison...that looking at one will help you better understand the other one...and that's something you [should] consider in writing your paper.

Here, Mary distinguishes subtle generic differences having do with purpose and social context for writing. While she has framed the assignment as a comparison paper, she brings into her discussion a comparison to the genre of the business report--a genre, which she explains, is designed to make a recommendation. The genre with which she is aligning her assignment--one which she shows spans beyond the confines of English--is what I would call the reflective essay: an exploration of relations between ideas, writers, texts, or historical periods.

So again we see the relationship of genre to boundaries. Are we teaching students fake genres--a comparison and contrast paper that only exists in the confines of the composition class? Or are we framing our discussions with students about the types of texts they are writing to show them the "real" genres they are learning, and the full range of issues involved with any genre--including context, purpose, and linguistic features? I would hope for the latter.

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The third issue--that of boundaries between audiences--is again an issue on which notions of genre can shed light. Students are well-conditioned by the time they reach high school and college composition classes to write for the teacher. While certainly we English teachers are a diverse breed, the problems we pose for our students as an audience are far less complex than the problems they will encounter in writing in nonacademic settings. A project in Stanford University's Freshman English department will illustrate.

The department, in conjunction with the Haas Center for Community Service on campus, has put together a program in which students take on writing assignments for non-profit agencies in the community. Among the goals of the program is to teach students how to deal with different audiences and different genres beyond what they encounter in school. An example of one student's experience will illustrate the difficulties students have in crossing over from academic boundaries into genres outside academia.

Jim is working with a non-profit organization which provides assistance to Central American refugees. His assignment is to write a major feature article for the organization's newsletter. Jim is meeting with the editor of the newsletter to go over his first draft. Here's what she tells him:

> ...I cut this down. The readership of the newsletter for the most part is pretty well informed...it's fine writing, but for this audience I cut out some of that [extra text]....Also, I was looking at first sentences in the paragraphs, to make first sentences tighter, because lots of times people are scanning and they're not going to read the whole thing...Also, I took out the quotes here because...in a more journalistic or more academic paper you would <u>want</u> to say where you heard this from and quote it...we don't worry about that in just a newsletter. People take our word for it...

In his English classes, or history or biology classes, would Jim learn how to hook busy readers, how much information is needed or not needed by this audience of newsletter readers? Clearly Jim had a lot to learn about writing for a new audience., The audience expectations and needs in the genre of the newsletter are altogether different than the needs or expectations of those of us who are being paid to read student texts.

Other students, who wrote for a cancer patient newsletter, found they had to be extremely sensitive to the emotional needs of their audience. Students writing for an Upward Bound newsletter had to deal with two entirely different audiences within the same context--one, the parents of Upward Bound students, who probably were not highly educated, and another, very highly educated audience of potential donors. Issues of audience are embedded within all genres. Once again, we see that negotiating our way across the boundaries of genres is central in acts of writing.

I have spoken of boundaries within texts, within classrooms, within schools, and of the ways in which teachers and students and writers all negotiate across those boundaries. As Mike Rose has pushed us in his work to consider the boundaries of students' lives outside the classroom and the bearing that has on tasks of reading and writing, I would suggest we also look at the boundaries of texts, contexts, and audience in the classroom to find where the boundaries need to be pushed, challenged, and more deeply examined.

Thank you very much.